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ABSTRACT

The first of two conferences on adult literacy focused on what needs to be done to give all nonreading U.S. adults the chance to learn to read, write, and do basic math. The number of adults seeking help in learning basic skills far exceeds the capacity of current adult literacy services to help them. Barriers to remedying the problem include lack of funds, training, and technological expertise. Conferences representing organizations that provide direct literacy tutoring and/or tutor training identified the following major needs: (1) money for training and technical assistance; (2) training in tutoring, the effective use of technology, program management, public policy development, and targeted tutoring approaches for minorities and other special populations; (3) cooperation at the national level in fundraising and sharing of resources and information; (4) collaboration among literacy providers, government, social services, business, and other sectors; (5) research on how many adults are in literacy programs and their progress; and (6) involvement of adult literacy specialists in changing public policy at the national and state levels. (The report includes an overview; a list of current unmet needs related to community programs, minorities, families and schools, prisons, technology, libraries, and staffing; a list of barriers; activities that could help solve problems and break down barriers; and a list of the 22 conference participants.) (CML)

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A Gannett Foundation Conference Report

Reaching Non-Readers:

Meeting needs in adult literacy services

Results of a conference of adult literacy specialists
at Gannett Foundation headquarters
May 15, 1990

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INTRODUCTION: WHY WE HELD THE CONFERENCE

The Gannett Foundation, a leading nongovernment funder of adult literacy programs, assembled leading adult literacy specialists for a comprehensive discussion of what needs to be done to give all non-reading American adults the chance to learn to read, write and do basic math.

The 22 participants represented organizations attending the quarterly meeting of the national Coalition for Literacy in Washington, D.C., the day before (see roster beginning on page 9).

"In its adult literacy program, now in its sixth year, the Gannett Foundation continues to seek ways to expand adult literacy services and involve more volunteers in providing those services," said Charles L. Overby, Gannett Foundation president and CEO.

"What was said at this gathering will help inform our thinking on future funding and program possibilities," he said.

Gannett Foundation Vice President Christy C. Bulkeley, whose program responsibilities include adult literacy, said, "Because learning to read occurs individual by individual, programs providing direct literacy services must be local and should take individual needs and community realities into account.

"The national attention, leadership and coordination needed for progress in adult literacy must be focused on strengthening those locally based services.

"We sensed that it was time to identify common barriers to providing full literacy services to everyone who needs them -- and to think about how the barriers might be overcome."

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OVERVIEW

The number of adults seeking help learning basic skills -- reading, writing, arithmetic -- far exceeds the capacity of current adult literacy services to help them, participants said during a conference of major adult literacy providers May 15 at the Gannett Foundation's headquarters.

The conferees said that barriers to remedying the problem included lack of funds, training, technological expertise, and other factors. But they said that simple expansion of the capacity of literacy organizations to teach adult non-readers is not the whole issue.

"We're reaching only about 6 percent of those who need help," said Anabel Newman, chair of the Coalition for Literacy. Agreed Jinx Crouch, president of Literacy Volunteers of America, "Millions of people are deficient in basic skills."

Attendees whose organizations provide direct literacy tutoring and/or tutor training could not estimate how many of the millions of adults needing help actually were seeking it. (Anecdotal numbers: 160,000 adult learners in Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America networks combined; 15,000 adults on waiting lists for various literacy programs in New York City.)

Sharon Darling, president of the National Center for Family Literacy, noted that "it's not just capacity-building" that is needed in adult literacy. "We're losing 70 percent of the people who come into literacy programs," she said. "We can't just think in terms of getting more money to serve more people," but must also continue working to make adult literacy services more effective so that learners don't drop out.

Major, common needs emerging from the discussion:

MONEY: For training needed in adult literacy programs, technical assistance on specialized aspects of literacy services, and research; and funding flexible enough to allow more tailored, community-oriented programs to develop

TRAINING: More of all types: in tutoring, in the effective use of technology, in program management, in public policy development and in targeted tutoring approaches for minorities and other special populations; overall, training of more adult-education teachers

COLLABORATION: More cooperation by adult literacy organizations at the national level in fundraising and sharing of resources and information; more collaboration among literacy providers, government, social services, business and other sectors

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(Overview, continued)

RESEARCH: Better accounting of how many adults are in literacy programs and of their progress; better understanding of how tutoring methods work and which approaches work best in which circumstances

POLICY: More consistent efforts by the adult literacy field and those making policy to involve adult literacy specialists in changing public policy at the national and state levels, including helping local programs get involved in defining needs and direction

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THE PROBLEM: CURRENT UNMET NEEDS

Conference participants identified needs in a range of categories:

Community programs

Participants offered different perspectives on how much more potential exists for volunteer involvement in literacy, and what the best roles for volunteers are. The sense was that volunteers are available or can be recruited, but not always when and where they are needed most. Also considered crucial: providing more training and other support for volunteers.

Other needs:

-- To undertake systematic reporting of how many adults are being served in adult literacy programs, and how many are seeking help in learning which types of basic skills -- in order to improve program management and planning

-- To track adult learners better after they leave programs, in order to monitor their progress and possible additional needs

-- To clarify the best role or roles of volunteers by studying the workings of volunteer-based literacy programs

-- To make more extensive use of research that has shown how to use learner characteristics to improve teaching

-- To provide more training in how to manage programs

-- To create better ways for local programs to measure how well they are serving adult learners

-- To set up regional training networks, thereby developing more readily available, indigenous training rather than relying solely on trainers from national groups

-- To provide state-level technical assistance for training and other specialized needs

-- To look not only at teaching adults basic skills but also their related individual needs and at the whole situation in a community, including other social-service needs, economic problems, and opportunities

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Minorities

-- To develop and make available more culturally relevant, experience-oriented tutoring approaches to and materials for teaching Black, Hispanic and Asian adult learners

-- To provide targeted training in such approaches to program managers and tutors

-- To counteract the poverty-induced loss of the will to learn and the stigma attached to tutorial help among many Blacks and Hispanics

-- To recruit more minorities as literacy teachers and volunteers

Families and schools

-- To increase family involvement in education, recognizing that adult literacy and adult education should be part of school reform -- to help break the continuing, generational cycle of failure to learn

-- To promote collaboration of state-level services that involve families in making family literacy a priority

-- To communicate the importance of lifelong learning -- adult education -- to K-12 teachers, including its role in helping children learn

-- To encourage school superintendents to recognize adult education as a priority need because it affects children's education

Prisons

-- To increase the percentage of the one million inmates of federal and state prisons who receive education services -- currently only 20 to 25 percent, financed by only 1 to 2 percent of prison budgets (few education services are provided in local jails)

-- To reach discharged inmates quickly with literacy and basic skills programs, while they are still receptive to them

-- To provide staff coordinators to enlist more volunteers as tutors in prisons and jails

-- To monitor former prisoners in education programs in order to document what effect education has on the rate of repeat crimes

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Technology

-- To make technology more available to literacy programs

-- Technical assistance: helping service organizations select and learn to use the most effective hardware and software

-- Technical information: communicating better with those using technology to keep them aware of technical advances

-- To train more tutors in the use of technology

-- To supplement computer-assisted learning with learning through a word-processing approach, and to design training in word-processing and other practical applications to tutoring

Libraries

Participants generally agreed that public libraries could be more active in the literacy movement, although it was noted that libraries "have always been about the business of literacy" without having promoted their work as such. They recognized that direct services are appropriate for some libraries, support services for others.

Needs:

-- To identify literacy as a basic service of libraries, furnishing the budget money to enable more libraries to provide tutoring, space for programs, referral, or other services

-- To supply libraries already active in literacy programs with more culturally relevant materials to serve different ethnic, racial and class groups, more materials that help people learn life skills, and other resources

-- To keep libraries informed of adult learning programs in communities so that they can make appropriate referrals

-- To help schools and libraries work together more to promote and increase literacy

Staffing

-- To increase the number of college and university students studying to become adult-education teachers

-- To expand the Student Literacy Corps, and maintain or increase VISTA literacy volunteers

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(Staffing, continued)

-- To bring more retired teachers back to teach adults

-- To provide in-service training to keep paid staff up to date and volunteers motivated

THE BARRIERS: WHAT'S HOLDING THINGS UP

-- Lack of recognition of the long-term, comprehensive nature of solving the illiteracy problem, and that it involves many interconnected economic and social issues

-- Lack of long-term, stable funding for local program staff, training, state and regional coalition staff, research, etc.

-- Legislation and regulations mandating literacy services without providing funds

-- Low pay and status of adult education as a career

-- Lack of learning centers for adults in big cities

-- Economic disadvantages among minorities that hamper efforts to recruit and retain minority volunteers, needed to help attract minority learners to programs

-- Lack of transition programs for ex-inmates who had begun adult-education programs before their release from prison; lack of a system for tracking prisoners and ex-prisoners either during or after their involvement with the criminal-justice system

-- Few links between adult basic education and vocational-education and training opportunities both within prisons and in communities

-- Lack of money for public library budgets to provide adult literacy as a basic service; also that library closings, budget cuts and competition for money with other literacy programs and schools make it harder to start and sustain adult literacy programs in libraries

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TOWARD SOLUTIONS: OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS

Participants suggested a number of activities that could be undertaken quickly to help solve problems and break down barriers in the adult literacy movement.

-- Create a single, national source of information and referral on all aspects of adult literacy

-- Increase national and state-level collaboration on funding, resources, and issues affecting adult literacy, to help free local programs to concentrate on providing services:

> "(Literacy programs) are having to take all of the energy that they could be putting into serving people" and put it into a struggle for resources. -- Jean Hammink, Literacy Network

> "We can't ask literacy providers to come together and circle the wagons and then shoot each other (in competition) for funding." -- Beth Broadway, United Way of America

-- Recognize that community-based programs reach some of the functionally illiterate adults who are hardest to reach by traditional methods; provide more funds for such programs and involve them more fully in the adult literacy field

-- Organize regular workshops providing targeted, regional training to help local programs learn more about and share information on technology, volunteer management, multi-service collaboration, public policy

-- Provide small technical-assistance grants to enable grassroots literacy programs to share their knowledge and techniques

-- Start forging more links with trusted institutions and agencies in minority communities -- churches, YMCAs, YWCAs, Family Services -- to promote literacy as a necessity

-- Use more computer-assisted and other technology-based instruction, which helps increase the number of adults who can be served, gets them involved in programs more quickly with less waiting, and speeds the learning rate

-- See that computer labs in local schools and colleges are available for computer-assisted instruction of adult learners

-- Urge teacher-training institutions to make adult education a required part of any degree program in teaching; build adult-ed course work into education curricula

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THE GANNETT FOUNDATION

The Gannett Foundation, of Arlington, Va., is among the nation's leading nongovernment funders of adult literacy programs.

Since beginning its adult literacy funding in 1985, the Gannett Foundation has provided more than $6 million to a number of programs and initiatives. These include:

- $2.66 million for the Literacy Challenge, a two-year, competitive program in cooperation with USA TODAY, to stimulate state-level coalition-building. Twenty states and Puerto Rico won grants to strengthen statewide coordination and cooperation among literacy programs.

- $2.3 million to local adult literacy organizations in communities served by Gannett Co., Inc. media.

- more than $1 million in support for a number of national organizations and programs, including: a national Adult Literacy and Technology network; the Urban Literacy Fund partnership; Literacy Volunteers of America; Laubach Literacy Action; the Assault on Illiteracy Program; the American Bar Association's forum on the Immigration Reform and Control Act; the Business Council for Effective Literacy.

The Gannett Foundation, with year-end 1989 assets of $650 million, is among the nation's largest private foundations. It spent about $30 million on grants, programs and operations in 1989.

In addition to adult literacy programs, the Gannett Foundation funds national programs to improve the teaching and practice of journalism, community projects, programs encouraging philanthropy and volunteerism, and scholarships.

Its two operating programs are the Gannett Center for Media Studies at Columbia University, the nation's first institute for the advanced study of mass communication and technological change, and the Paul Miller Washington Reporting Fellowships in Washington, D.C. The foundation was created in 1935 by Frank Gannett, founder of Gannett Co., Inc.

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